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SUBJECT: JOINT TOURISM STATEMENT PART OF BROADER ISRAELI
CAMPAIGN TO DRAW CHRISTIAN VISITORS

REF: JERUSALEM 04500

Classified By: Economic Counselor Bill Weinstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: On Wednesday, November 24, Israeli Minister of Tourism Gideon Ezra and Palestinian Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Mitri Abu Aita released a joint statement promising Israeli-Palestinian cooperation in support of international and religious tourism to the "holy land" (reftel). According to Israeli Ministry officials, this was a symbolic gesture designed to set the minds of international visitors at ease, and represents the first step in a planned series of cooperation discussions on Israeli and Palestinian sites of religious significance. Ministry and media sources noted that Ezra is following up the statement with action: his office approached the IDF with a request to ease travel for religious pilgrims and tourists on the patrol-heavy roads from Jerusalem to Bethlehem this Christmas. In addition, Ezra plans to recommend to UNESCO that the Israeli-Arab city of Nazareth be named a World Heritage Site. The joint statement and the Israeli Ministry's attendant activities are in line with a GOI strategy released last week that targets "bible belt" communities as a surefire source of increased religious-based tourism. Gazan Palestinians said that since the Gaza Strip contains no sites of historic significance they do not expect any positive effects from the joint Israeli-Palestinian statement, but they are optimistic about Gaza's potential as a "beach vacation destination" for West Bankers if Israel eases closures and the PA invests in tourism infrastructure. End Summary.

Joint Statement a "First Step" In Cooperation on Tourism

2. (C) Israeli Minister of Tourism Gideon Ezra and Palestinian Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Mitri Abu Aita released a joint statement November 24 promising to cooperate in promoting tourism to international audiences and ensuring the "safe and smooth passage" of religious pilgrims, especially between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, during the holiday season (reftel). Arie Marom, director of the North America marketing division in the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, told Econoff November 29 that the meeting -- the first of its kind since the intifada began in 2000 -- was carefully timed with the approach of Christmas, and that Israeli officials took Abu Aita's own Christianity and his Bethlehem residency into account when considering whether to go forward. Marom said that the MoT hoped the meeting would "play well" to international tourists nervous about visiting Israel due to security concerns, and added that it was only a first step in a series of planned Israeli-Palestinian discussions regarding tourism at specific sites of religious or historical significance.

Israeli MoT Serious about Bringing in Christians

3. (C) Marom explained that Christian religious sites are Israel's "main tourist attraction," a draw surpassing even historic Jewish sites. After four years of the intifada, he said, the Ministry is ready to start actively inducing tourists back, and must cooperate especially with the Palestinian and Israeli-Arab officials in whose municipalities Christian sites are mainly located. To this end, Ezra reportedly approached senior IDF officials with a request to ease travel for international tourists and religious pilgrims between Jerusalem and Bethlehem -- an area thick with roadblocks and heavily patrolled by IDF soldiers -- during the Christmas season. He also encouraged the mayor of Nazareth, an Israeli-Arab municipality that receives over half of the Christian tourists visiting the holy land annually, to hold a joint press conference with the mayor of the adjacent Jewish municipality of Nazareth Illit in support of further tourism. The Ministry also plans to recommend to UNESCO that Nazareth be named a World Heritage Site. All this is aimed at promoting Nazareth and its environs as a safe, rewarding place to visit.

Emissary to "Bible Belt" Will Carry out New Strategy

14. (C) Last week the Ministry released a report in Hebrew on its new strategic marketing plan for North America, in which it states that the American Christian communities of the "bible belt" are a source of "tens of millions of Christian supporters of Israel" whose potential as tourists has not yet been fully realized, and who will be the chief target of a "marketing blitz." Beginning this summer, a Ministry representative will spearhead this campaign from a U.S. office, possibly to be based in Texas. The campaign will include multi-media presentations and expositions within local communities, as well as "workshops" with church officials and Christian travel agencies in support of travel to Israel. In a similar vein, the offices of the director generals of the Ministries of Tourism and Foreign Affairs released a document this week for distribution to Israeli missions abroad, which encourages GOI emissaries at all levels to promote tourism to "groups of supporters" of Israel -- identified primarily as Jewish and Christian communities -- within their host populations.

Agreement Overlooks Gaza; Businessmen Looking Ahead

15. (C) Gazan hotel owners and restaurateurs are pessimistic that the joint Israeli-Palestinian statement of November 24 and the cooperative steps the Israeli Ministry says it is planning for the future will help them. The Gaza Strip simply contains no sites of religious or historic significance, Hashim al-Hussaini of Paltrade told Econoff November 30. While the positive international press generated by a Ministerial-level Israeli-Palestinian meeting "could not hurt Gaza's image", he explained, few in the Strip's tourist industry had even heard that a meeting had taken place, so irrelevant was it to their everyday business. Arie Marom concurred that the statement was not orchestrated with the Gaza Strip in mind. "Gaza will never be a destination for international tourists," he said.

16. (C) Yet businessmen in Gaza take seriously the potential for significant "local tourism" if Israel and the PA take certain steps to facilitate it. Before the current intifada, a Reyyes Consulting Company representative told Econoff, the Gaza Strip was a stopping-place for Israeli Arabs traveling to Egypt, a long weekend destination for staff members of international organizations, and a beach holiday for West Bank Palestinians. It is possible to get back to the nearly full hotels and flourishing beach restaurants of four years ago, he said, if Israel allows its Arab citizens back into the Strip through Erez, and if the PA takes a keener interest in the development of tourist infrastructure along the coast. He noted that even now construction companies have put up four new hotels in Gaza -- the drive exists among businessmen, they simply need an organizing force.

17. (C) Comment: While Israeli officials indicated that neither side intended the joint statement on tourism as a confidence-building measure, the timing of the event lends it positive resonance within both populations. The Israeli and Palestinian Tourism Ministries made a similar joint statement of intent to facilitate Christmas tourism last year, but unlike this year's statement, it received little media attention, and it did not result in any follow-up discussions.

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